

In Hot Water

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

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One of my weak spots in Russian is the use of prefixes. Just the other day, I wanted to say that my nose was stuffed up (нос заложен), and instead said нос наложен, which sounds like my nose was either pasted on or under arrest. This was highly entertaining to my Russian friends and solidified my reputation as a very strange, semi-literate, modern version of Nikolai Gogol.

But if that mistake was avoidable, there is one Russian verb that is a linguistic accident waiting to happen: топить. The verb has two totally contradictory meanings: to heat something and to drown something or someone. The distinction is clarified by context and prefixes. Over the years, I have cheerfully wanted to drown stoves and heat up kittens. But why is there one Russian verb used with water and fire?

Etymologists are not certain. Some think there were originally two different words. But my favorite etymologist, Max Vasmer, has a hypothesis that I like. He suggested that the origin of топить is топь, a flooded swampy area where snow has melted. You can see how the word might have developed in two ways. On the one hand, something heated up and melted, and on

the other, a wet place where a person or thing could drown.

In any case, unless you want to sound like a jerk it's good to keep these meanings separate.

The heating топить is used for stoves and houses. Пойдём топить баню (Let's go heat up the bath house). Начался отопительный сезон в Москве отвратительно: очень долго вообще не топили, а потом то и дело выключали. (The heating season in Moscow began horribly. For a long time they didn't turn on the heat at all, and then they kept turning it on and off.)

With this топить, the perfective is истопить: Сколько дров понадобится, чтобы правильно истопить баню? (How much wood do you need to heat up the bath house properly?)

Топить can also mean to heat something until it's melted, like топить воск (to melt wax). In cooking, топить молоко is to bake milk — to put in in a warm stove for a day until it is slightly caramelized. The result, топлёное молоко (baked milk), lasts longer and is sweeter than regular milk. Топлёное масло is clarified butter. When you're at the stove, the perfective form of топить is растопить: Растопить масло в сковороде, добавить лук и обжаривать до мягкости (Melt butter in a skillet, add onions and sauté until they are soft).

The drowning топить is used to submerge anything in water, like — horribly — kittens when a cat has an unwanted litter: топить котят (to drown kittens). Он помогал негодьям убивать его и топить его труп в пруду (He helped those monsters kill him and sink his body in the pond).

Here, the perfective form is утопить, used for both inanimate objects and living creatures. Моряки утопили корабль у причала (The sailors scuppered the ship by the dock). Женщина хотела утопить своих детей (The woman wanted to drown her children).

Like in English, the drowning топить can be used in the toolshed: топить гвоздь (to sink a nail deep into wood.) And it's also used figuratively in Russian, like in English: топить горе в вине (to drown your sorrows in wine).

And now if you'll excuse me, after my nose embarrassment, that's exactly what I'm going to do.

Michele A. Berdy, a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, is author of "The Russian Word's Worth" (Glas), a collection of her columns.

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